Rajani Ranjan Sircar

– a man with great story in the history of Andaman Islands

Acknowledgement

At the very outset I feel I am blessed by the spirits of my father and forefathers and by my gods and goddesses, for I am still able to work in good health. No doubt that I am inspired by the writings of my grandfather Late Rajani Ranjan Sircar, and further it would not have been possible without the love, the heart pledged support and encouragement of my parents and relatives especially my elder brothers and maternal uncles.

Rajani Ranjan Sircar – Tale of a first batch refugee in Andaman

Rajani Ranjan Sircar ('Sarkar' in some official records), son of Parbati Prasad was my proud paternal grandfather. He was born in 1909 in the village Jujkhola in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) about 50 Kms from the Kotwali of Chattogram (often spelled as Chatgaon or Chittagong). He was one of the pioneering persons of his time to contribute in making of the present Andamans. He was the member of the first batch of the refugees arrived here in 1949 in the Andamans under the Colonial Scheme of the Government of India. His story as a representative of the first batch of the refugees in the Andamans with all ups and downs I intend to place in this book not merely for the reason that he was my grandfather, but for the fact that his life of struggle is a reflection of a refugee life; and he was a prominent and popular man who played a lead role in refugee settlements in the Andamans. He continued his services of bringing refugees from various camps for many years as revealed in the archival records of 1959. He was an active member of the Chief Commissioner's Advisory Council during 1957-60 and then became the first Bengali settler of the Andamans to be nominated as a member of the Home Minister's Advisory Committee (HMAC) in 1961-62.

Dominant narratives on the history of Partition describe the exodus primarily as a wave of dispossessed Hindus migrating from Pakistan to India, and an opposite flow of Muslim migrants crossing the Indian border to reach Pakistan. The story of the migration of my grandfather Rajani Ranjan Sircar, and his family to the Andamans is a collective story of open wounds of Partition and the impact of the global demographic upheaval, the post- colonial geopolitics, policies, displacement and voluntary choices. Through oral history from the

reminiscences within our family, it is well explored set of facts that the Hindu Bengali refugees from East Bengal bore the brunt of the displacement and faced multiple problems in the eventual resettlement in the remote Andamans. On the other side of the room of joy of India's independence, these wretched people were dragged hither and thither from station to footpath and from footpath to camps.

It was in October 1948, that an exploratory party, headed by the then Minister–in Charge of the Refugee Rehabilitation Department visited the Andamans with a view to examine the possibility of resettling displaced families from East Pakistan in the islands. After a careful survey, the party was unanimous in their opinion that the islands were admirably suitable for colonization of displaced persons. Subsequently, in December 1948, a public announcement was made officially in West Bengal under headline 'Colonization in the Andamans' with a lot of attractive offers of facilities, to be provided with the refugees. At this time, in most of the refugee camps but not in all, impoverished camp dwellers were living with bodies waiting for mass cremation. Enlisted families were carefully selected to ensure that they had a sufficient number of able-bodied working males; and callus had to be touched and approved by officials as proof of a hard-working man. Finally, on basis of the recommendation made by the then Minister–in Charge of the Refugee Rehabilitation Department, 199 families in two batches in 1949, of their own choice, sailed for the Andamans on 15th March 1949 and 31st March 1949. 12 families have since returned to the country; two on account of illness and others because either they were unwilling to undertake or were unsuited for agricultural work. Such families, on expressing their desire to return, were given free passage back to Calcutta. During their stay in the Andamans they received the usual cash dole. Of these remaining 187 East Bengal families including the family of my grandfather, 176 families were cultivators, seven were artisans, one family was a confectioner, one was a compounder, and the remaining two families did not belong to any particular category.

Rajani Ranjan Sircar's first wife Basanti (my father's mother), died long ago when my father was a toddler. He in view of the emerged geopolitical situation grim and uncertain, decided to leave his village with his second wife Subhashini, son Swadesh Bandhu Sarkar (my father, then 22 years) and five daughters namely Geeta, Sabita, Nibedita, Binita and Namita. He with his family somehow crossed the border and began to live at somewhere in Tripura. But here too the monster shadow of the geopolitics continued to chase and he with his family had to leave Tripura and eventually as a member of the first batch of refugees arrived at the Andamans under the colonial scheme in March 1949. The Andaman scenario had by this time a primitive look having less population dominated by the historically settled Local Born Pre-1942 people. The Andamans then had to undergo various changes under different schemes of the government. The first batch refugees were initially placed at the outskirt of Port Blair at Homfraygunj, Manpur, Collinpur and Manglutan, and few other places; but these areas were not the permanent resettlement areas for them and the agricultural land was yet to be allotted. Subsequently after a certain period, my grandfather got a cultivable land at Mathura and since he was a politically active being an educated man amidst a majority of illiterate refugees, very shortly he earned a reputation amongst the administrative officials. He was greatly admired by A. K.

Ghosh, the then Chief Commissioner for his constant cooperation and contribution. He was now given responsibility to prepare other refugee batches for resettlement at Andamans but this time not under the colonial scheme but a rehabilitation scheme.

Under the given task of the Andaman administration, families in a large number were convinced and brought by my grandfather Rajani Ranjan Sircar. These families included some families of his native village Jujkhola and other adjacent parts including Fatikchari and Chittagong of East Pakistan, who were facing socio-religious atrocities in the dramatically changed geo-political situation after the 'partition', somehow reached West Bengal. One of such family was of one Nibaran Chandra Bose from Chattogram (Chittagong) arrived in the Andamans 1961. The family head Nibaran Chandra Bose had to visit frequently to have his document clearance at Dhaka for coming to India and eventually he got frustrated of rubbing his shoe from one office to another. Then one villager offered him to help in crossing the border on some fees. In his professional illegal arrangement, Nibaran Chandra Bose, his wife Savitri Bose, daughter Joythsna Bose and sons Nirmal Chandra Bose, Sunil Chandra Bose, Anil Kumar Bose and Krishna Bose had to walk day and night through the hill, marsh, forest and rivers to finally reach West Bengal via Pashchimpur, Tripura and Agartala. Here, the family came in contact of Rajani Ranjan Sircar, my grandfather, who brought them to Andamans under the existing scheme of rehabilitation. Unfortunately, in the Andamans the life for this once flourished family of East Bengal (East Pakistan after 'Partition') became unenviable under the changing circumstances. The life-raft on papers had full of opportunities and attractive offers but the ground reality was quite different. The refugees in majority had to face the livelihood difficulties and came at the verge of starvation. Since, my grandfather persuaded them to come to Andamans, he personally decided to take care of this family. He gifted them a piece of his own land at Mathura and arranged for marriage of his only son (my father) with the elder daughter of Nibaran Chandra Bose (my mother). Thus, with this marital knot two families became one family. To the utter surprise of Nibaran Chandra Bose, after four years in 1965, he and nineteen others were allotted pieces of land at Tirur. Owing to the frequent Jarawa raids, they had to face manifold problems in cultivation of the land. As per a report of 1971, out of these twenty refugees who got land at Tirur, only four in great difficulties somehow cultivated the land. Nibaran Chandra Bose, the man of great coverage with help of his grown up sons established his own business of cane furniture at Mathura. Gradually the family earned a good reputation with this business and his well educated sons got employment having reputed positions. The descendants of this large family are well settled and presently dispersely growing at various parts of the Andamans and in mainland India.

Even after my grandfather had re-settled himself at Mathura with his family, he being an old man had to face the problems of livelihood unexpectedly in the coming years. Owing to his old age, he was not able to cultivate his land under the scorching sun and heavy rain. He began to face the same difficulties as the other refugees faced, due to the lack of a visionary and flexible policy. Many of the refugees were given bad quality land and many were not able to refund the taken loan. He was still sincere in his services to assist the administration. In 1954, his wife fell ill seriously and was admitted in the hospital at Aberdeen but

the treatment was insufficient. He received no financial assistance for treatment of his wife. The old man had to take his wife to Calcutta to save her but all his efforts went in vain and his wife died, leaving behind her six children to struggle ahead without mother. After the death of his wife he was totally broken having his pecuniary condition miserable, and above all it was beyond his every effort to take care of his motherless children at this old age. In 1955, the sad old man unwillingly decided to send all of his five daughters to an orphanage at Calcutta, where refugee orphans were being housed for training on industrial works and allied handicrafts. He wrote an application dated 17th February 1955 to the then Chief Commissioner of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands requesting him to provide sea passage of the sailing of the vessel S. S. Maharaja. But very soon he was advised by few of his friends not to take the daughters to the orphanage as lots of carelessness and negligence were in practice there in the orphanage. He then gave up his thought to send the daughters to the orphanage. Looking to the pain and misery in the face of the father, two of his young daughters committed suicide with their own perception to relieve their sad father from all his difficulties. This time too, the hopeless and broken man was not the man to seek any assistance from anybody. He continued to meet the higher officials and prominent people of the city but he never disclosed his pathetic family condition to anybody for want of any help. The extreme poverty my grandfather was facing was in fact caused by the sick loan policy of the government; and the problem was further increased with the land encroachment practices by the Burmans.

Rajani Ranjan Sircar firstly built a house with the help of the local administration on his allotted plot No 80 and 90 at Mathura village. Soon he felt inconvenience on the house site to live there and he raised a small garden there. The same year (1957) he was nominated as a member of the Chief Commissioner's Advisory Council. Further he was deputed to West Bengal for visiting various camps with a view of giving publicity to the government's rehabilitation scheme. For this reason he used to travel Calcutta and often remained absent from his allotted land in the Andamans. In his absence, one Burmese man namely Sutin Burma erected his dwelling on the garden of Rajani Ranjan. On his return the old man brought this matter into the notice of the then Chief Commissioner. With his prompt interference, the officers namely Julfiqaruddin, Tehsildar and A.C.M at that time, Narayan Biswas and Ananta Joydhar from Panchayat Committee, Bakhtawar Singh, Sub-Inspector of Police then as a Circle Inspector, Khudiram, Patwari, Parimal Das, Choudhury assembled on the disputed plot and sorted out the problems. But Sutin Burma was an adamant man of criminal nature. He in 1962 around, on bribe, got the ownership of the plot on record in absence of Rajani Ranjan Sircar who was still making to-fro journey for the purpose assigned by the administration. Sutin Burma this time accompanied by another partner Ramdas from Garacharma built a house on the allotted plot of Rajani Ranjan Sircar. By the year 1966, the old man became too much tired of knocking the official doors that he gave up all his efforts to regain his lost land. Sutin Burma went to Burma after he handed over the land to Ramdas. Rajani Ranjan Sircar submitted his last petition dated 17th February 1969 to the concerned Tehsildar but no action he received in his favour.

Rajani Ranjan Sircar was allotted a land under the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Land Tenure Regulation of 1926 and due to no income generation he could not clear the loan and hence he was deprived from the occupancy right over the land. The fact behind the fact was that the old and physically weak man was not able to do hard work to convert the rock-strewn land into a green paddy field, and since most of the time he was in Calcutta with the government given task to bring the refugees, he was not able to do any other work to generate income which further led to his severe poverty. He with the purpose for grant of occupancy right had representated before the Home Minister, Government of India during his visit to the islands in the first week of November 1967. He also presented his representation to Mr. Banerjee, Joint Secretary to the Prime Minister of India on 05th February 1968. His representation dated 16th February 1968 addressed to the Chief Commissioner is reproduced here. *"Sir, kindly refer to Your No. 35-21(9) 58/PL dated the 9th January 1968 refusing the grant of occupancy right for the last 20 years. Further I have to state that the above reply has shocked me very much increasing the undesired harassment unconstitutionally despite my logics that (1) Since I have not mortgaged my paddy holdings under reference to government, so why should the paddy holdings be dragged into loan issue? It should remain entirely a separate issue, (2) Beside the government action of non-issue of occupancy right for paddy holding to which I have got the legitimate right, is quite unconstitutional because the revenue rules 1926 of Andaman and Nicobars clearly indicate that the owners of paddy holdings become entitled to get the occupancy right after completion of five years of occupation. My paddy holdings are in my possession since 1949 and therefore, I have every right to get it but to my misfortune I have not been granted as yet although I have been applying for it for the last many years.*

I have been giving applications after applications informing the government that I would pay up all the government dues by selling my paddy holdings and unless the occupancy right and sale permission are not granted, the land cannot be sold. I further pointed out that I would execute the sale deed and perform the money transaction under the strict supervision of government to enable the government to collect the money of government loan from the sale proceed without any difficulty…but the genuine request was turned down.

I had taken the government loan for installing a factory for making umbrella handles from the mill waste but the benign government has not been able to allot the site for factory building as yet although a period of about five years have passed and I have been applying for it all through. This is the point worth considering. My financial status has continuously been deteriorating and reached to the state of pauper and dragged to the door of starvation. And as a result of which my two daughters dependent on me could not bear the torture of poverty and hunger and committed suicide….."

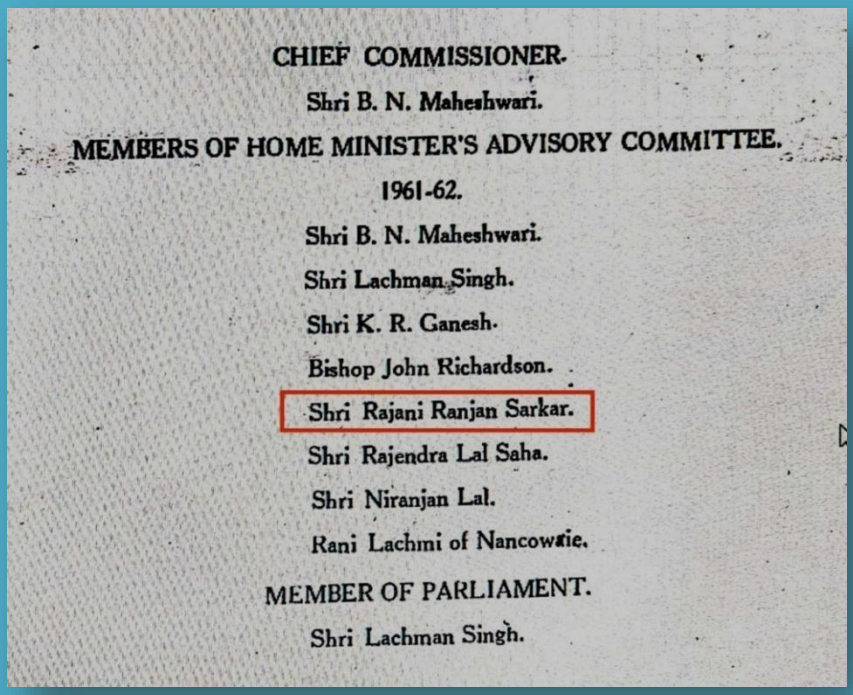
This heart touching letter of my grandfather reflects some bitter realities about the adamant and unflexible schemes in the name of welfare of refugees and the unsolved difficulties of varied nature they faced. On his correspondences reactions came on different dates from different Under Secretaries of Ministry of Home Affairs, GOI, New Delhi namely Y.D. Sehgal, B. K. Halve and R. C. Gupta and from the Chief Commissioner's office including a communication

from K. K. Warriar, Assistant Secretary to the CC, but no wilful effort to find a solution between the system and orthodoxy was made to help the poor old man. The letter is enough to expose the 'wrongs' and to grab attention on the 'issues in practice' pertaining to the refugees. The story of my grandfather stands as a classic testimony of how an insensible and non-visionary policy and attitude can destroy a family and above all the 'original aim' the scheme was introduced for.

My grandfather was never an idle man at his so old age. He received a loan and as it had the purpose, he purchased some milchy goats and cows, Unfortunately 11 goats died within a short period for unknown reasons. Similar problem some other refugees also faced. The Veterinary Department of Wimberlygunj made their best deal to cure all the goats but their efforts went in vain. His three milchy cows with two calves also died for unknown reasons. Then he brought a cow from Port Blair to Mathura village but the said cow met an accident. Subsequently, he wanted to establish a factory of Umbrella stick but no support he received. In 1964 around he had a small furniture workshop at Haddo opposite present Mini Zoo near the house of Musa Master, a prominent citizen. The workshop supplied many furniture items to the Chief Commissioner's office; and the wooden gate which is still in use inside the Kalibari of Premnagar was also a production of this workshop. Despite receiving few supply orders it failed to gain profit from the workshop due to his frequent travelling between Calcutta and Andamans.

Rajani Ranjan Sircar was highly educated and socio-politically active at Ministry levels as well as in the local domain where no one knew or guessed about his extreme poverty he was silently going through. The man often clad in neat and clean white dhoti- kurta had suffered so much so silently that the deaths of two daughters did not raise any curiosity amongst the people and the officers of the administration. Apart from the grief-stricken events in his family, he continued to serve on behalf of the government on no salary or any honorarium.

Since he was well acquainted with Hindi, English and Bengali, gradually became popular among the local groups and the administrative officials as well. In the initial decade of the refugee settlements, he played a key role, as requested by the local administration to go to Calcutta regularly and select the refugee families, guide them and bring them under the scheme of rehabilitation. He served as member of Chief Commissioner's Advisory Council in 1957-60 and Home Minister's Advisory Council in 1961-62 onwards. In the Home Minister's Advisory Council, he was accompanied by some prominent personalities of the Islands such as Lachman Singh (the then Member of Parliament), K. R. Ganesh, Bishop John Richardson (the first nominated Member of Parliament), Rani Lachmi of Nancowrie, and others. It is noteworthy that he was often surnamed as 'Sarkar' instead of 'Sircar'.



CHIEF COMMISSIONER.

Shri B. N. Maheshwari.

MEMBERS OF HOME MINISTER'S ADVISORY COMMITTEE.

1961-62.

Shri B. N. Maheshwari.

Shri Lachman Singh.

Shri K. R. Ganesh.

Bishop John Richardson.

Shri Rajani Ranjan Sarkar.

Shri Rajendra Lal Saha.

Shri Niranjan Lal.

Rani Lachmi of Nancowrie.

MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT.

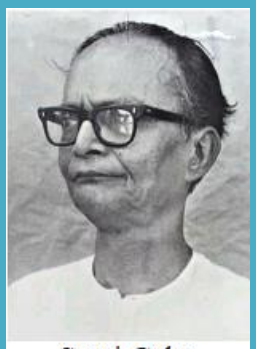
Shri Lachman Singh.

An old testimony - Home Minister's Advisory Council of 1961-62

A rare old picture of Rajani Ranjan Sircar in 1972
Sitting from Left to Right – Namita Das (Youngest daughter of Rajani Ranjan Sircar), B. Das (Son-in Law), Rajani Ranjan Sircar, Swadesh Bandhu Sircar (Son) and Jyothsna Sircar (Daughter-in Law) and sitting on the ground are his grandchildren

Affiliation with Freedom fighters

Since he was a leading personality even in his region of East Pakistan, and frequently arrived at the refugee camps in West Bengal, he was in the contact of many Bengali freedom fighters once incarcerated in the Cellular Jail (National Memorial) and most of them in his contacts were the political prisoners released in 1938. In fact, many of them were from the same place in and around Chattogram or Chatgaon or say Chittagong of East Bengal. These freedom fighters in groups used to pay visit to the Cellular Jail, their first choice as *Mukti-teerth* or say pilgrimage in the Andamans on government sponsorship, year wise and on special occasions. My grandfather was one of the Andamanean escorts to roam here and there with them in the city. He used to regularly meet his distant relative Nagendra Nath Dey at his residence at Antony Bagan, Sealdah, West Bengal, who was imprisoned in the Cellular Jail from 1932 to 1938. His name is still engraved at serial No 205 in the Marble plaque of the Central Tower of the Cellular Jail. Nagendra Nath Dey and my grandfather were born in the same small village Jujkhola (Juzkhal) in sub-district Fatikchhari near Chittagong. During my school days, in exploit of summer vacation, I with my mother and father visited Calcutta and spent a day in the house of Nagendra Nath Dey at Sealdah and touched the feet of this old man of the Andaman history for want of his blessing on instruction of my father. He was then living in a deserted British time's bricked house in acute poverty, in which after some years he died in a deserted condition. He was born in 1917 and was an active member of Anusheelan Samity. He was arrested in connection with Bathua Action and Conspiracy Case, sentenced to a term of ten years and deported to the Andamans. During his imprisonment he took part in the second hunger strike in the Cellular Jail.


Saroj Guha

The second freedom fighter close to my grandfather was Saroj Kanti Guha. His name as Saroj Guha is engraved at serial No 287 in the commemorative inscription on the Central Tower of the Cellular Jail. Saroj Kanti Guha, an associate of Master Surya Sen accompanied by another revolutionary Romen Bhowmick, killed Mr. Durno, the then District Magistrate of Dhaka on 28th October 1931, after they waited outside for about six months to find this chance. Magistrate Durno would send daily three security men to purchase wine from a wine shop adjacent to a sweet stall. On the day of murder, his security men were diverted somewhere and then Saroj Guha and Romen Bhjowmick got no delay in killing Durno. This story was told by Saroj Guha himself to my grandfather and before a family in East Burdwan. The story of his bravery has been less known and less spoken but available in Shailesh De's *Ami Subhash Bolchhi* written in Bangla language at page no. 282. After killing of Magistrate Durno, Saroj Guha and other revolutionaries escaped through a tunnel and remained out of the catch. The frustrated British arrested a large number of

Nagendra Nath Dey

Dhaka residents on ground of suspicion. To protest against the atrocities and the arrest of the innocent people, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose arrived but he was not permitted to enter the Dhaka and was arrested at Narayangunj Railway Station on 7th November 1931. He was released and sent back by a steamer from Chandpur (Ananda Bazaar dated 08-11-1931). Later, Saroj Guha was arrested and transported to Andamans. Saroj Guha was interned in the Cellular Jail during the period from 1932 to 1938. During a torture, one of his eyes was pierced by a hot pin and he became blind of one eye. During 1970s when I was a child of 6-7, he along with other Ex-political prisoners of Cellular Jail under a sponsored programme of the administration, visited Andamans; and my grandfather brought them to our home at Anarkali in Port Blair. The neighbours gathered at our premises to meet and talk with these icons of India's freedom struggle. Owing to their prescribed busy schedule, they left after few hours but their memorable visit is still pitched in my indelible memory. He married with a Chakma girl to save her from her forced marriage with an unwanted old man. Saroj Guha's only daughter now stays at Durgapur in West Bengal, had been for a long time in contact of my cousins at East Burdwan.

Jogesh Chandra Sinha and Nikunja Behari Sinha (Right)

The East Burdwan connection of the revolutionaries

There was a direct connection of the revolutionaries of Chittagong (many of them were imprisoned in the Cellular Jail) with some revolutionary families in Sripally district of East Burdwan. Mainly three of such families arrived from Chittagong have been in our deep family relationship began from my grandfather. During my school days I would go with my parents to meet them. During my previous all journeys to the mainland India, as essential I preferred to visit these three homes, stayed with them for a week or so, enjoying their affection, love and care, more than a blood relation. Excluding the years wasted under the crux of Covid-19, my visit to them has been annual. As the relationship descended from my grandfather, my father also had a deep family relationship with them as his two brothers and one sister; and to me they were my caring *Jethus* (father's elder brothers) and loving *Pishi* (father's elder sister). My eldest *Jethu* was Nibaran Choudhury Sinha who did not leave Chittagong, while his younger brothers Jogesh Chandra Sinha, Nikunja Behari Sinha (youngest) and sister (my *Pishi*) Jyothsna Rani Choudhury left Chittagong and came to Sripally owing to the geo-political disturbances.

It is pertinent to mention here that Nikunja Behari Sinha was a recorded revolutionary (*Viplabi*) declared as Freedom Fighter in free India.

The film unit of the Hindi movie 'Chittagong' headed by the Director and Producer Bedabrata Pain, in a function of 'Chitagong' in Sanskriti Manch at Burdwan had an interactive session. In this session they were made realized by my cousin Chandan Sinha that they did a big mistake by missing in the movie the murder of District Magistrate Durno by Saroj Guha and others. In this movie, the roles of the Chittagong revolutionaries were played mainly by Manoj Bajpayee, Barry John, Vega Tamotia and Nawazuddin Siddiquue. The tale of Subodh Roy, the youngest rebel incarcerated in the Cellular Jail was also given a place in the movie, based on true stories. Subodh Roy died in Calcutta in 2006. Many of the revolutionaries after repatriated from Cellular Jail had re-established their scattered life in Calcutta and other parts of West Bengal in which some of them gained good recognition and position while some lived in poverty and in a deserted condition; but they always tried to help each other in trouble. It is my proud privilege here to inform my readers that Subodh Choudhury, Ganesh Ghosh and few other revolutionaries of the Chittagong Armoury Case imprisoned in the Cellular Jail used to visit Sripally from Calcutta to meet the Sinha family, particularly to meet the widow of freedom fighter Nikunja Behari Sinha. Ganesh Ghosh's one hand was observed to be amputated, my cousin Chandan Sinha told me. Ganesh Ghosh helped the widow of Nikunja Behari Sinha as a witness in declaration of her husband as 'Freedom Fighter' and as a result she being the widow of a Freedom Fighter got all pension benefits from the government. Nikunja Behari Sinha, as a member of the official delegation of the Chittagong revolutionaries on invitation from Sheikh Mujibur Rehman visited Chittagong after Bangladesh became an independent nation in 1971 from East Pakistan. Nikunja Behari Sinha had three sons Vijay, Vishwajit and Indrajit and three daughters Sakuntala (died in childhood), Bula and Meena. Vijay *dada* is the eldest of them.

Author (in blue) with widow of freedom fighter Nikunja Behari Sinha (Left) and her son Indrajit and daughter Meena in Burdwan during 2011

Nikunja Behari Sinha's elder brother Jogesh Chandra Sinha had two sons namely Chandan Sinha and Prabhu Sinha. Chandan Sinha has two sons namely Saurabh Sinha and Arnab Sinha. My *Jetthi-maa*, the wife of Jogesh Chandra Sinha with *pishi* Jyothsna Choudhury would be their main cooks during the freedom struggle. During their visits even in 70s, sometimes in a group of five or six, their care was taken by the wife of Nikunja Behari Sinha and thus the Sinha's home became a hub for the revolutionaries for their gossiping and they spent long hours and sometimes one or two nights in their friendly gusto forgetting any time pre-scheduled. The third family, Jyothsna Rani Choudhury my *Pishi* had two daughters Shikha, Manu and son Mukul.

(From left) Widows of Jogesh Chandra Sinha, Nikunja Behari Sinha and Jyothsna Rani Choudhury in 2011

Unfortunately, the grandchildren of this electronic age, busy with mobile phones, pay no serious attention with patience to hear, preserve and document the elders' voice about the family history. Edward Bulwer-Lytton said, "W*e live longer than our forefathers; but we suffer more from a thousand artificial anxieties and cares. They fatigued only the muscles, we exhaust the finer strength of the nerves*"

It is very pertinent to write here that many refugees particularly of 1949 batch, before coming to the Andamans, were directly and indirectly associated with the revolutionaries of the Indian freedom struggle in different conspiracies of East Bengal. Barun Banerjee, son of 1949 batch refugee Manoranjan Banerjee, said that his father who died on 16th September 1976 at Diglipur was one of those revolutionaries and escaped to Assam at the time when his accompanied revolutionaries were being arrested. Barun Banerjee further stated, "*When I was adolescent, on encouragement from my father, would often accompany 'Master Moshay' (Rajani Ranjan Sircar) in his journeys at Port Blair and other various parts in the Andamans in connection with his work. Rajani Ranjan Sircar would tell him many stories and events of his life. As once he revealed, he was closely associated with the revolutionaries of Chittagong and one of them was Pritilata.*"

As I already mentioned that my grandfather had family relationship with the revolutionaries Nagendra Nath Dey and Saroj Guha and had numerous contacts with other revolutionaries including Ganesh Ghosh and Subodh Choudhury. Now, it is pertinent here to mention about the young girl Pritilata, with whom my grandfather had a familiar connection. Pritilata Waddedar (5 May 1911 – 24 September 1932) was a Bengali revolutionary nationalist born in Patiya village of East Pakistan (Bangladesh). She joined a revolutionary group headed by Surya Sen. Surya Sen and his revolutionary group decided to kill Mr. Craig, Inspector General of Chittagong. Ramakrishna Biswas and Kalipada Chakravarty were assigned for this task; but they mistakenly killed SP of Chandpur and Tarini Mukherjee instead of Craig. Ramakrishna Biswas and Kalipada Chakravarty were arrested on 2nd December 1931. Biswas was executed and Chakravarty was transported to Cellular Jail. When Ramakrishna Biswas was in Alipore Jail, his family lacked the amount of money required to travel to Alipore Jail of Calcutta. Since at that time Pritilata was staying in Kolkata, she was asked to go to Alipore Jail and meet Ramkrishna Biswas. Later, along with the revolutionary group of Surya Sen, Pritilata took part in many raids like attacks on the Telephone & Telegraph offices and the capture of the reserve police line. In the Jalalabad battle, she took the responsibility to supply explosives to the revolutionaries. She represented the fifteen revolutionaries in the September 1932 armed attack on the Pahartali European Club, during which one person was killed and eleven injured. The revolutionaries torched the club and were later caught by the British police. To avoid arrest, Pritilata consumed cyanide and died.

My grandfather was in the regular contact of Bangeshwar Roy and others, who had constituted the ‘Ex-Andaman Political Prisoners’ Fraternity Circle’ and more than three hundred freedom fighters joined this circle. This circle further made a strong successful attempt to save the present wings of the Cellular Jail from their demolishment.

My father was often not so serious in knowing all things of the past from my grandfather. For this reason it is still obscure whether he himself was a ‘revolutionary’ or was only ‘supporting’ them; but any one answer is sure, in view of the fact, that evidently there was a direct connection of Rajani Ranjan Sircar with the leading revolutionaries Saroj Guha (Chittagong Conspiracy), Pritilata (Chittagong Conspiracy), Nagendra Nath Dey (Bathua Conspiracy), Ganesh Ghosh, Subodh Choudhury and Nikunja Behari Sinha. I don’t know how many and who were the other revolutionaries my grandfather was in contact with, and what role he was playing then in the Chittagong and other cases but my research in insatiable curiosity is still progressive. Looking to his constant contacts, the story of Manoranjan Benerjee, the place Chittagong he belonged to and his age then, one cannot disagree with the possibility about him to be a revolutionary or their ground supporter. This conclusion gets more strength on the ground of few more facts that many arrested revolutionaries particularly the leaders did not open their mouth till death about who were their partners. Secondly, the Chittagong revolutionaries were mostly at the age between 14 and 21 and the senior revolutionaries including Master Da (Surya Sen) tried to the possible extent to save the young and teen aged lads from the British notice sending them back to their homes right after the task completed, and my grandfather was a very young lad then; and the third fact is that, many

revolutionaries after the task completed, under strategy got dispersed to different directions and after the independence those revolutionaries did not come out to tell their tales, and largely lived in anonymity or deserted condition as in the case of Manoranjan Banerjee. The fact above all is that looking to the instances of painful attempts by some revolutionaries to get benefit of Freedom Fighter status, many of the freedom fighters had given up the effort to go here to there for want of pension benefit or any Certificate to prove that he was a freedom fighter. It was an emotional harassment too. For any action, there are three parts, viz. End, Means and Consequence. It has been the habit of the people everywhere in the world to judge an action by its consequences. For example, America fought with England for her liberty and she succeeded in her action. Everyone eulogised America. But, if America had failed, all would have cried on her as a rebel. But this ought not to be the proper attitude. An action should be judged by the aim and the means. If the aim of these political prisoners was 'Swarajya' who would blame them? But, though their aim was good, yet their means were violent and therefore a large number of so-called peace loving political groups did not support them. In all their bloody actions, there was not an iota of selfishness in them. All they did, they did for the sake of their country. They cannot be treated like terrorists, while they should be treated like war prisoners. But, the treatment which was meted out to these political prisoners was so bad that it was unimaginable injustice to them, in free India.

After arrived at the Andamans in free India, my grandfather was still showing some tendencies and signs in behaviour as if either he is a revolutionary or he was deeply influenced by the revolutionaries. The revolutionaries would arrange for a mass gathering to unite against the British under the scroll of *Pratigya* (Oath) for a specific mission or revolutionary task. In the same manner, one day he gathered the prominent villagers of Mathura and Brindaban and all of them took oath of 'Unity, Peace and Patriotism' in the village, as revealed in the available copy of the oath collected from an old record. In this Oath taking, gathered were Birendra Kumar Shil, Nibaran Chandra Bose, Paresh Chandra Dey, Kartik Sutradhar, Lalit Sutradhar, Sitanath Sutradhar, Nimai Chandra Mondal, Gorango Joydhar, Manohar Adhikari, Prafulla Shil, Kunj Behari Bhadra, Narayan Chandra Biswas, Ananto Kumar Joydhar, Bhudeb Bala, Ganesh Chandra Dhali, Ganesh Chandra Joydhar, Anando Dhali, Suren Madhu, Bicharan Madhu, Naren Das and Suraj Narayan. His patriotic stance can also be realized from the name of his son 'Swadesh' which means 'own nation'.

The Hindu Bengali refugees in the Andamans

Despite the initial hardships and unfavourable living conditions, the Bengali settlers transformed with time an unknown wild space into a familiar home space. Thousands of families of East Bengal origin resettled on the Islands, both as free migrants as well as beneficiaries of government's rehabilitation schemes. In 1951 the Bengali-speaking population of Andaman and Nicobar Islands was only 2363, and by 1991 the number had grown up to 64,706 according to the Census of India. Between 1949 and 1975, the Government of India, with the full cooperation of the Rehabilitation Ministry of West Bengal, resettled more than three thousand families.

Refugees in Andamans published in Jugantar of 27 May 1950

The Shivdasani Report recommended for free passage, free land and other incentives to the refugees in the Andamans further reduced. The first two batches of Bengali refugees comprising 198 families reached Port Blair on 15th March 1949 and 31st March 1949, respectively. In the beginning, they were accommodated in barracks at a distance of few miles from Port Blair. Finding unexpected realities, 28 families of the 1949 batch returned; and those who received loan but were not in the position to repay, were not allowed to leave the island. In the beginning, the local people of Pre-1942 raised some objections against the rehabilitation in the Andamans but gradually their protest subsided with the rehabilitation of the refugees in the far flung areas out of the South Andaman. The subsequent batches were resettled in Middle Andaman (1953), North Andaman (1955-60), Havelock (1954-60), Neill (1968-70) and Little Andaman (1968-74). Gradually with the passage of time, the settlement villages became Bengali villages of Bengali homogeneous community. They built small temples in their courtyards and planted trees of red Hibiscus flowers (to daily offer before mother godess Kali) in the premises recreating the look of their native villages they left behind.

Today Bengalis in majority as the complex and variegated society, inhabit different parts of the Islands, with Bengali as their mother-tongue. Despite these numbers, the journeys and lives of Bengali people on the Andamans are mostly an unwritten history. In the new space and social environment the Bengali settlers continued their cultural traditions, religious festivals and music performances. Their socio-cultural values are coloured by different sub-caste sections of the Bengalis. This classification should not be viewed from the window of faith based Caste-ism only. The categories are in fact the divisions of work which collectively makes the society a variegated progressive society with unity of members (because one requires service of other). These sub-caste people are *Brahman or Pondit, Naapit, Karmakar, Shah, Taanti, Sutradhar,*

Halua-daam, Kayastha and Namashudra. A *Brahman* or *Pondit* has to perform worship and conduct rituals in the community, a *Naapit* has a role of barber, a *Karmakar* member is a blacksmith, a *Shah* member has to make conch bangles of Bengali Tradition, a *Taanti* is a weaver who makes clothes, a *Sutradhar* is a potter, a *Halua-daam* can make sweets and other cooked items, and the *Kayastha* and *Namashudra* members are free to do anything. Such is the system prevails in a Hindu Bengali society in the Andamans. The refugee groups while leaving for the Andamans an unknown place through negotiation included all these so called sub-caste members to help each other in requirement of various works in the new place.

The refugees' tradition marshal art as a game *Dhal-shordki*

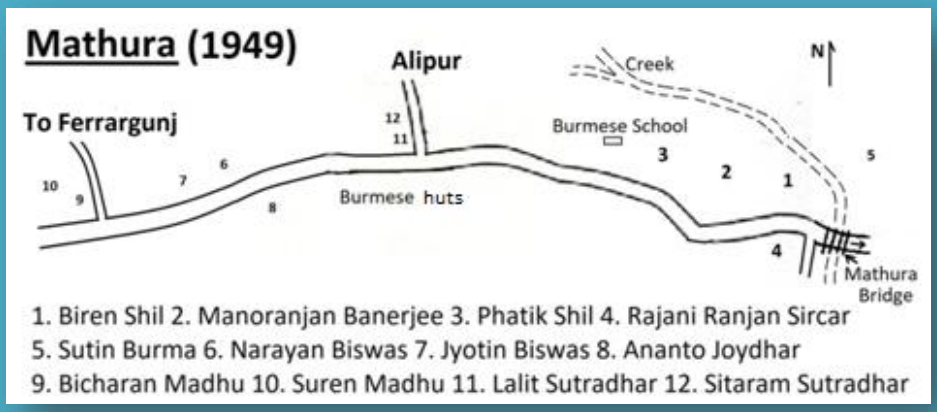
Mathura – a unique village of 1949 batch

Mathura village with total 171 families is located in Ferrargunj Tehsil of South Andaman district, Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The population of Mathura is 801 (401 Male and 400 Females) as per Population Census 2011. This village has literacy rate (88.79 %) higher than the total of Andaman and Nicobar Islands (86.63 %) as per the census of 2011. The Mathura and its neighbouring village Brindaban mentioned in the record of Census 1901 were earlier the self-supporters' villages. Thus, the Mathura has been flourished from 14 families of 1949 to 171 families in 2011 with a high literacy rate.

The families of the first refugee batch of 1949 arrived at Mathura were headed by Biren Shil, Manoranjan Banerjee, Phatik Shil, Rajani Ranjan Sircar, Jotin Biswas, Narayan Biwas, Ananto Joydhar, Suren Madhu, Bicharan Madhu, Lalit Sutradhar, Sitanath Sutradhar, Nimai Chandra Mondal and few other families. They were later joined by few other families including the families of Suraj Narayan, Nibaran Chandra Bose and Bhudeb Bala etc. During 1949-52, only 14

familes were settled in Mathura having the total population of 63 only which increased to 81 in 1956.

I, with the golden opportunity to interact with few of the descendants of 1949 batch refugees, have been able to unearth the hitherto unspoken difficulties the first batch refugees had to face and the unwritten circumstances at the time of their rehabilitation. Their true stories contain relationship and affection for each other, assistance of neighbours, sincerity and cheating of few, the problems and solutions, and the socio-political occurrences amidst the prescribed livelihood support of the local administration.



My maternal grandfather, Nibaran Chandra Bose arrived in Mathura to join the already settled 1949 batch families, was greatly supported by my paternal grandfather Rajani Ranjan Sircar in all walks of the rehabilitation and livelihood in Mathura. Eventually these two families became one with the marriage of my mother Jyothsna Bose, daughter of Nibaran Chandra Bose with my father Swadesh Bandhu Sircar, son of Rajani Ranjan Sircar. Thus the marriage was a testimonial knot of affection and harmony built between the families of a refugee of 1949 and a refugee family of 1961.

Barun Banerjee

Barun Banerjee, son of Manoranjan Banerjee (1949 batch) now a retired teacher said, "*My father and other families were brought to the Andamans and allowed to stay in Mathura according to the Bengali-Hindu caste system then in vogue. For example, Biren Shil and Phatik Shil of 'Naapit' (Barber community) and Manoranjan Banerjee of 'Brahman' (priest) were allowed to reside at one side of the main road while Rajani Ranjan Sircar being Kayastha (No occupation restriction) was allotted the land just opposite to the former cluster. But with no orthodoxy and any ism in mind, they all lived together in friendship cooperating each other. Preferably and basically the cultivator- refugees were brought to the Andamans under colonization scheme. They travelled to the Andamans by SS Maharaja ship and during their journey to the Andamans they were given rice, dal, tea and all other cooking materials to cook themselves in the ship since there was no cook and no canteen in the ship. When arrived in Andamans, my father Manoranjan Banerjee had two sons and two daughters, all small in age*

and similarly other families were also having toddlers and infants while travelling to the Andamans. With these small children , to earn bread, the fathers had to undergo extremely hard struggle when the allotted land were found to be located either near salty creek or on hillocks being uncultivable for paddy."
He about my grandfather said, "*Since 'Master Moshay' was highly educated and closely associated with the administration, he was paid great respect by the refugees of his time. He knew all about my father who was a revolutionary and had escaped to Assam before he came to the Andamans. Master Moshay himself had some clear connection with Pritilata, who was a famous revolutionary*".

Barun Banerjee stated that he got posted as a teacher at the Junior Basic School at Mathura, then only one school in the village. During that period a Burmese school was there at the same place adjacent to the Junior Basic School (JBS), which was existed before the JBS came in existence. This school was established with only two teachers and 38 students. The school was inspected by a team from Ministry of Education on 29th April 1956. Rajani Ranjan Sircar played a key role in giving feed back to the team for further improvement in the education system, through the questionnaire given to him by the team headed by the Chairman A.N. Basu, Principal, Central Institute of Education, Delhi. During the stint of Barun Banerjee in the school, the Principal was a very popular man in the village namely Mr. Narayan Chandra Singharoy. His son Chanchan Singharoy is a National awardee teacher serving in the Islands.

My maternal uncles (mother's brothers) Sunil Chandra Bose and Anil Kumar Bose explained that the Hindu Bengali refugees had a harmonious relationship with the Burmese who were already settled in the village. Before their final repatriation in 1965, the Burmese land owners sold out their lands situated at Mathura to many outside people originating a fresh demographic influx and several disputes. A Burmese namely Sutin Burma sold his encroached land to a resident of Garacharama namely Ramdas who further sold the same land to one K.T. Mohammed. Apart from this, many Mathura residents also came forward to purchase the land from Burmese at cheap rate. Phatik Shil purchased a land from a Burmese man while he was already allotted a piece of land by the government. In the same way Kartik Sutradhar, a refugee and professional carpenter purchased land from a Burmese at a cheap rate and subsequently he sold the same to a village refugee Biren Shil. Many refugees themselves volunteered to sale their allotted land. Two outside residents Iqbal and D.C. Dey purchased an allotted land of Arun Banerjee. Manoranjan Benerjee had developed a cultivable land on a stream side but subsequently he transferred his land to Rajani Ranjan Sircar. Lalit Sutradhar had a piece of land on the road side but later he found that on its soil there was a good stock of red bricks. Looking to this stock, a Ranchi man purchased the land from him. This clever Ranchi man began to sale out those red bricks to the people who were building their houses in the vicinity. Thus the land rejected by the owner proved to be a lucky-land for the purchaser.

The cases of land disputes in a large number were pending before the administration. Many cases the villagers promptly settled themselves and many were not reported. Biren Shil (1949 batch) proceeded back to mainland soon after his re-settlement, but after his return to the village in 1962 he had no land to stay on. Once again the unity and harmonious relationship among the

villagers came in effect. Nibaran Chandra Bose accommodated his family in his house for about three months. Subsequently he became self dependant so much that he ably purchased a land situated at Alipur road from Kartik Sutradhar, and purchased another piece of land from a Burmese before his repatriation. During that period, Nibaran Chandra Bose and Ananto Joydhar were the first refugees in the village to construct a double storied wooden house, constructed by a village refugee Lalit Sutradhar. The houses of Nimai Chandra Mondal and Suraj Narayan were also constructed by Lalit Sutradhar. It is revealed from these facts that the refugees from various caste-based professional backgrounds were brought and resettled under a firmed thought and plan. Each of the batches with majority of cultivators had preferably a priest, a barber and a carpenter to assist at times.

Thus, Mathura of 1949 has come to this date through various events and constructive changes with the new demographic influx. The infrastructural development especially of road is perceptible in the present day Mathura, which in fact began in 1970s with the effort of Mr. C. Mohammed, the then Director of Rural Development. He was the man behind the construction of the new road near the Mathura Bridge.

Writer of this research based article is a Historian based at Andaman Islands
He can be communicated in pronobsircar@gmail.com